

Road block:
Many states are
telling teen drivers
who they can—and
can't—drive with.

UNSAFE BEHIND THE WHEEL?

With car crashes the leading cause of death for teenagers, states are placing greater restrictions on young drivers

BY KATE ZERNIKE

It's long been a rite of passage for American teens: getting a driver's license and going for a spin with as many friends as can cram into the car.

But with mounting evidence that teenagers are at high risk for car accidents, more states are legislating away that care-free cruise, imposing tougher restrictions on how and when teens can drive—and who they can take along for the ride.

Fifteen states and Washington, D.C., now prohibit unsupervised teenagers in their probationary period from driving with another teenager, and 44 states forbid them from driving with more than one teen. In South Carolina, teenagers can't drive after 6 p.m. in winter (8 p.m. in summer), and in Idaho, they're banned

from driving from sundown to sunup.

In New Jersey—which has long had the nation's highest licensing age, 17—lawmakers have pushed further. New Jersey now requires first-year drivers under 21 to attach a red decal to their license plates to make it easier for the police to enforce an 11 p.m. curfew and passenger restrictions. And a bill now before the state legislature would require parents of teen drivers to complete a driver education course.

Safety campaigners point to studies showing that teen driving laws have significantly reduced traffic deaths.

But others, like Jeffrey Nadel, the 19-year-old president of the National Youth Rights Association, take issue with driving restrictions.

"These laws are blatantly discriminatory," says Nadel. He also argues they may have an unintended downside:

A 2011 study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* suggests that restrictions for young drivers may lead to a higher incidence of fatal accidents for 18-year-olds, possibly because they didn't get enough practical driving experience earlier.

Lawmakers around the nation, however, say the restrictions are necessary in light of some alarming statistics: Car crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers, who have a crash rate four times higher than that of older drivers.

Texting Behind the Wheel

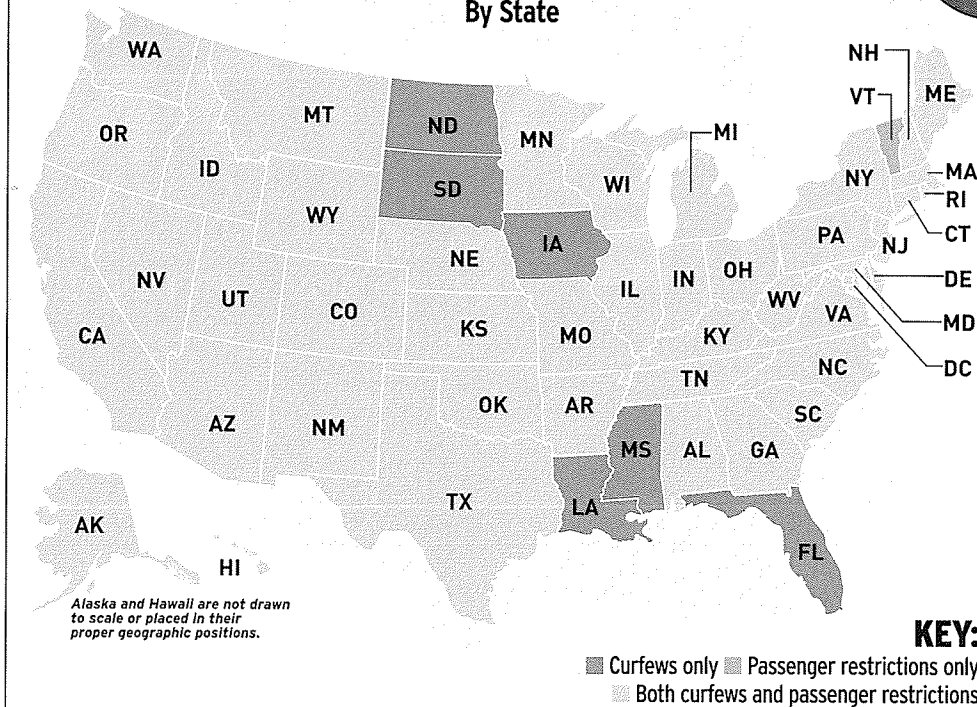
Studies have shown that teens tend to overrate their driving skills and under-rate risks on the road. They also have more trouble multitasking—talking to friends, listening to the radio, and texting are particularly hazardous. Teenage drivers' risk of a crash increases 44 percent

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age 21 or even 25.

But Gregg D. Trautmann, an attorney and parent of two teens, believes some of the laws might actually be dangerous. He filed a suit against New Jersey three years ago, arguing that Kyleigh's Law violates federal driver privacy laws. He and other critics of the law also worry that marking a teen car may attract predators. The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled against him this summer, but Trautmann says he plans to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"We have young people flying Apache helicopters in Afghanistan to protect us; you're saying you can't drive a car past 11 [at night]?" says Trautmann.

For others, like Megan Lavery, a senior at Mainland Regional High School near Atlantic City, New Jersey, concerns about privacy need to be weighed against the dangers of teen driving. Megan often appears on local TV to remind students about a tragedy in 2011, when an SUV crowded with eight Mainland football players

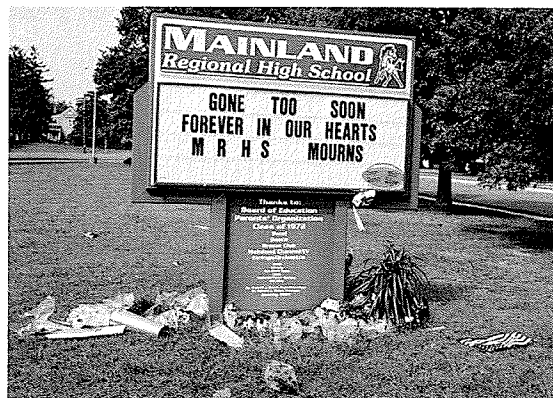
with one teenage passenger and quadruples with three or more. Two-thirds of teen passenger deaths happen in a car driven by another teen.

Efforts to address the dangers of teen driving date back to the mid-1990s. Starting with Florida, states began passing laws providing for "graduated driver's licenses" that require teenagers to undergo periods of supervision and probation before getting a full license.

Now, all states have graduated driver's licensing. And most are moving toward tougher restrictions on young drivers, including passenger limits, tighter curfews, and bans on cellphone use, even with headsets. Some states are also tying driving privileges to school attendance. These kinds of restrictions generally do not apply to new drivers over 21.

This summer, Congress got involved, offering highway safety grants to states that strengthen teen driving laws and crack down on texting-and-driving for all ages: Distracted driving was a factor in at least 3,000 deaths in 2010.

Efforts have been particularly aggressive in the bumper-to-bumper Northeast.



A memorial for four New Jersey teens killed in a crash last year

Bills requiring a decal for drivers under 21 are pending in the New York and Rhode Island legislatures. They come on the heels of New Jersey's "Kyleigh's Law," which took effect in 2010. The law is named for Kyleigh D'Alessio, a 16-year-old killed in a car driven by another teenager in 2006.

"We don't want to say that teens are a menace to us all, but the reality is, when teen drivers crash, it's people in other cars or teen passengers who end up dying," says Justin McNaull of the auto club AAA, which supports passenger limits to

crashed, killing four of them. Now, more than a year later, she says, students have become more complacent about packing friends into their cars.

"Even I forget sometimes," she says. "You don't forget about what happened, but somebody asks you for a ride home, and you think, it's only a couple of blocks. It's easy to forget that the rules are there to keep us safe. A couple of blocks can change a whole life." ●

Kate Zernike is a national correspondent for The Times. With reporting by Veronica Majerol.